

Gingerbread

Single parents, equal families

They said I **wasn't doing enough** to do the job search...The hours are **not suitable** for someone in my predicament. The job coach does **not offer any official advice** for me because I am a single parent...it's really **horrible**...it's **demoralizing**. You are putting me in an **uncompromising situation** where I have to take my daughter out of nursery and **stop my job**. I've been left sanctioned. I've been left **destitute**. I am a single parent. He has got no one else except for me to look after him. **I was told it was my problem** to sort out childcare so I can attend...**they ignored me**. If you leave this job, you will be sanctioned for six months...or up to three years. **The process was hard**...I waited about six weeks for any sort of acknowledgement of my appeal. I didn't find it particularly easy...**I didn't have any legal advice** about what to include or exclude. It is a bit **daunting** if you don't know [to] whom you are writing or what you should write. I literally had a sandwich a day just to save food for the children...But I couldn't have seen them **go without or go hungry**. My daughter asked for money from her friends at school and they gave her money. **I can't pay any bills** and I need to because **I am getting more into debt**. I have anxiety and they **made my condition worse**. They [work coaches] often put threatening messages in my journal on a Friday. Total and utter **fear, shock and worry**. Panic about how to manage. Would have been homeless but for family and friends. How can I come to the appointments? How can I pay my bills? I still need to pay bills. When they sanctioned me, it **really made me angry**... **My little boy is not a burden**. The government is making out he is a burden. I want to go to work. **I don't think the children should be punished**...still need to be fed and clothed and live in a warm home...sanctions undermine the purpose of the benefit system in our country to protect the **poorest and most vulnerable** from poverty.

Unhelpful and unfair?

The impact of single parent sanctions

About this report

This report is the second from a project looking at the impact of sanctions on single parent families, and follows a briefing on the quantitative data available on sanctions imposed on single parents.

The report focuses on qualitative research on the impact of sanctions on single parents and their families, and how benefit conditions affect job-seeking behaviour. The report also presents the first findings on the impact of sanctions under Universal Credit since job-seeking rules were tightened for single parents.

Stay up to date with the project:
www.gingerbread.org.uk/sanctions

About Gingerbread

Gingerbread is the leading national charity working with single parent families. Our mission is to champion and enable single parent families to live secure, happy and fulfilling lives.

Since 1918 we've been supporting, advising and campaigning with single parents to help them meet their family's needs and achieve their goals.

We want to create a world in which diverse families can thrive. We won't stop working until we achieve this vision. Whatever success means for a single parent – a healthy family, a flexible job, stable finances or a chance to study – we work with them to make it happen.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the single parents who shared their often difficult experiences; without them, this report would not have been possible. We would also like to thank Trust for London for their support with this project.

Summary

Over the past 20 years, job-seeking single parents have been exposed to increasingly strict ‘conditionality’ (the system of work preparation and job-seeking rules with which they must comply to receive state support). As a result, many more single parents than a decade ago are at risk of sanctions, imposed for ‘non-compliance’ with conditions. Single parents also face a higher risk of unfair sanctions than other claimants, raising questions about how well this approach works.

Under Universal Credit, the system is changing yet again. For the first time, parents of pre-school aged children and claimants in work will be subject to conditions and exposed to sanctions. With policy at a turning point, and criticisms from the National Audit Office and others that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) knows little of the actual impact of its sanctions policy and results in questionable value for money, this report reviews the effect of sanctions policy on single parent families – in terms of both warnings and sanctions imposed.

Trapped between conditions and circumstances

Single parents’ experiences illustrate how job-seeking expectations continue to take a tick-box approach, informed by inflexible numerical targets rather than actual intentions to seek work. For single parents, this presents a particular problem. The lack of personalisation means there is a failure to understand and respond to the barriers to work (eg lack of childcare, part-time/flexible jobs, training) and changing circumstances facing single parent families. As a result, single parents are often caught out by unrealistic job-seeking expectations – for example, sanctioned for not applying for enough jobs, despite there being few part-time or flexible jobs available locally.

The new claimant commitments introduced in 2013 have not helped to reverse these longstanding trends – despite high profile promises to increase tailored and flexible support. Claimant commitments are often far from the personalised job-seeking ‘contract’ intended, with conditions imposed on single parents without negotiation – and sometimes failing to recognise even the available allowances that work coaches can make for single parents. As a result, sanctions arise from the rigidity of a system that does not reflect single parents’ needs.

A new approach under Universal Credit?

There seems to be no sign of change under Universal Credit. The same issues are leading to warnings or sanctions, despite further promises of a different approach. Furthermore, working single parents are affected for the first time under Universal Credit, increasing the reach and risk of sanctions.

Calls to Gingerbread’s helpline suggest many single parents experience perverse incentives around managing work under Universal Credit. Single parents receiving Universal Credit have voiced concerns about entering work, in case they are liable for a sanction should work prove unsustainable due to inaccessible childcare or inflexible hours. As Universal Credit deals with working claimants, working parents are now reporting similar concerns about leaving their job when it becomes unmanageable – leaving them trapped in work they cannot sustain in case it leads to a sanction. This undermines the policy intention of Universal Credit to smooth the entry into work and ensure work always pays.

Universal Credit has also made it more difficult to sustain work in some cases. In particular, problems with administering support for childcare have led to some single parents being forced to give up work. This is not just a problem for Universal Credit’s policy intention to ‘make work pay’, but places single parents at further risk of a sanction for giving up work without good reason.

An immediate and longer-term toll

The immediate impact of sanctions is clear – financially, for single parents already on a low income, they throw family finances into disarray and can lead to long-term problems of debt and rent

arrears. Even for those parents who had their sanction overturned, the long delays often mean incurring debts which are difficult to repay.

Benefit sanctions also take a significant toll on single parents' mental and emotional health – both as a result of warnings and those imposed. Most parents described the increased stress after sanction warnings and the emotional toll of worrying about how to manage to care for their children in the event of a sanction.

Any savings the DWP makes from sanctions comes at the expense of not just single parents' well-being, but wider networks which pick up the responsibility of supporting single parents who have been sanctioned – including family and friends, and support services such as food banks, local authorities and housing associations.

Crucially, single parents felt that sanctions – and the threat of them – did little to help job-seeking. Sanctions led to both practical and personal barriers to finding work. The financial impact can move single parents further from work, as they are in a less secure position to manage the costs of job-seeking (eg travelling to interviews) or entering work. The strain on households resulting from a sanction means single parents are focused on making ends meet for their children, rather than job-seeking. Others found conditions interfered with longer term plans to find sustainable work, eg retraining. Finally, sanctions – particularly unfair warnings or sanctions – can disrupt the vital relationship between claimants and work coaches, leaving single parents less engaged with jobcentre support.

Urgency to act

The experiences in this report illustrate how benefit sanctions are fundamentally a problematic way of supporting single parents – one of the government's key target groups in achieving full employment and targeting so-called 'worklessness'. Instead of using sanctions solely in cases of clear wilful non-compliance, they are being used to police a tick-box approach that allows little flexibility to recognise claimants' wider needs and barriers to work. Far from encouraging single parents to look for or enter work, they create financial and emotional stress which can move them further from work – and inhibit parents from taking work in case they cannot sustain it and get sanctioned as a result. While this is described as 'fairness for the taxpayer', single parents and their children are caught in the wide gap between policy intention and reality.

This report adds to the evidence which suggests the benefit sanctions system for single parents is inappropriate and outdated, and should be radically overhauled or ended if the government is serious about enabling single parents to enter and sustain work. Of course, this would be a fundamental reform for any government and, with the departure from the EU dominating the political and legislative agenda, perhaps even less feasible in the current climate.

Notwithstanding a long-term vision to seek radical alternatives to the current sanctions system, we outline four key areas to address urgently in the short-term, to ensure a fairer approach to administering benefits:

Minimise financial penalties to limit the impact of sanctions on claimants and their children:

- Introduce a 'yellow card' warning system before a first sanction
- Reduce, rather than fully suspend, benefit payments for parents if sanctioning

Suspend unrealistic conditions to ensure single parents' circumstances are recognised:

- Suspend job-seeking requirements for parents of three and four year olds, until affordable and good quality childcare and flexible work is available locally
- End the mandatory use of Universal Jobmatch for job-seeking, allowing wider job search options for claimants

Overhaul claimant commitments to embed appropriate and flexible conditionality:

- Publish a parents' guide on the full range of possible single parent flexibilities which allow them to adjust work search requirements to meet their needs
- Introduce a clear process for revising claimant commitments to accommodate changes in circumstances and recognise additional needs
- Increase scrutiny and evaluation of single parents' claimant commitments

Rebalance employment support away from penalising single parents:

- Introduce single parent training for work coaches
- Strengthen into-work support provision, eg for childcare costs
- Pilot alternatives to financial penalties to enable job-seeking.

Benefit sanctions may have reduced in number of late, but Universal Credit reforms will mean many more parents will come within their scope – not just through job-seeking requirements for parents with pre-school aged children, but conditions to seek higher pay or more hours for working claimants. The apparent move towards a more holistic system of support for low-income families, whether in or out of work, suggests the narrow 'work-first' pressure of the legacy benefit sanctions has run its course. It also presents the government with an ideal window of opportunity to ensure the social security system supports families rather than setting them up to fail. Without action from the government, however, single parents and their children will continue to be caught in the middle of a misguided and failing policy – and the significant financial and emotional burden that this entails.

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